

# White Fragility and the Grotesque in Joyce Carol Oates's *Black Girl/White Girl*

LIZ KELLA

In [some] places the hellishness of the class struggle is evident to the naked eye while here in gilded Princeton you must delve beneath surfaces, to see with an 'uncanny' eye.

(Joyce Carol Oates, *The Accursed*, 150)

As a Princeton faculty member, and longtime sharp-eyed observer of the frailties of the academic milieu, [Oates] is among the best and most tough-minded fictional analysts of university trauma. Invariably she grasps its swings between horror and farce, its networks of malicious gossip, its combinations of political ambition and intellectual idealism.

(Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers. The Academic Novel and Its Discontents*, 120).

The fiction of Joyce Carol Oates can be easily located within the Gothic tradition of American literature. Often considered in relation to Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, as well as to writers central to the Southern Gothic such as Faulkner and O'Connor, Oates's numerous novels – even those which are not explicitly Gothic<sup>1</sup> – frequently evoke atmospheres, develop themes, and employ motifs and narrative strategies associated with the Gothic. They explore the dark side of human desire and the subterranean workings of the unconscious, and they feature grotesque and abject subjects, taboos and secrets, often connected to an individual's private past, but simultaneously connected to larger social concerns. A connection between the personal and the social characterizes Oates's writing, and such a connection has also been considered a defining feature of the American Gothic.<sup>2</sup> As Teresa A. Goddu

<sup>1</sup> Oates has for example written a "Gothic" series of 5 novels, has edited a collection of Gothic short stories, and has written short stories collected under the category of the grotesque.

<sup>2</sup> Oates's work is frequently considered in terms of realism and naturalism as well. Brenda Daly writes: "Oates's relationship to genres is complex. Often, for example, she deliberately transgresses generic conventions in order to challenge implicit hierarchies of gender, race, and class." Brenda Daly, *Lavish Self-Divisions. The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996), p. x.

argues, “Despite its supernatural effects and its persecuted psyches, Gothic’s terrors are neither imaginary nor individual.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, Gothic terrors register the anxieties of a nation, and in the American context these anxieties have historically centered on encounters, sometimes transgressive, across the boundaries of class, gender, and, above all, race.

In this article, I will examine Oates’s use of the Gothic mode in her 2006 novel *Black Girl/White Girl*. The novel is structured as a frame story, narrated in 1990 by an accomplished white female professor of history, Generva (Genna) Meade, who writes, as she puts it, “in the service of justice”.<sup>4</sup> In the frame tale, Genna confesses to being implicated in the death of her college roommate, a young African American woman named Minette Swift, daughter of a charismatic minister, who is on scholarship at the prestigious liberal arts college founded by Genna’s Quaker abolitionist ancestors, one of whom Genna is named after. The bulk of the novel is a retrospective first-person account of Genna’s freshman year, 1974–75. The framed, retrospective narrative focuses on Genna’s relationship with Minette, leading up to Minette’s untimely death, but it also includes Genna’s account of her fraught relationship to her parents and her own childhood, both stamped by the cultural and political radicalism of the 1960s. Like much of Oates’s work, *Black Girl, White Girl* examines “American society, past and present, especially in terms of the distribution of power among institutions,” prominently education and the family, both of which are important to this text.<sup>5</sup> The novel indexes important figures of 1960s protest and radicalism such as the Black Panthers, the Catonsville Nine, and the Weathermen, as well as moments such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, Watergate, and Richard Nixon’s resignation. These figures are also connected to historical protest, with the college’s liberal commitment to racial equality and socio-economic diversity presented as an extension of the founders’ commitment to the abolition of slavery in the latter part of the 1800s.

*Black Girl/White Girl* casts the college campus as a Gothic locale haunted by history, with the dormitory a stage for mysterious and frightening events. The narrative also charts the transformation of characters into the grotesques that Bakhtin associated with carnival and social transformation. In Oates’s

<sup>3</sup> Teresa A. Goddu, “American Gothic”, in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, eds. Catherine Spooner & Emma McEvoy (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, *Black Girl/White Girl* (London: Harper, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Daly 1996, p. x.

rendering, however, the grotesque characters are far from comic; they instead register “the confusion, the incongruence, the whirling heterogeneity of modern life,” particularly the modern life of American race relations.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in an early interview Oates confirms the connection between the Gothic and contemporary social concerns: “Gothicism is not a literary tradition so much as a fairly realistic assessment of modern life.”<sup>7</sup> In this article, I explore Oates’s use of Gothic tropes, particularly her use of the grotesque, and I argue that while these are used to critically examine white liberal consciousness, they rely upon and ultimately reinforce racial stereotypes and white fragility, as defined by Robin Diangelo to characterize defensive processes by which white Americans protect and shore up the social advantages of whiteness. Oates’s struggle with her representation of race relations demonstrates the difficulties of interrogating established US narratives about race and countering white privilege in the US.

\*\*\*

The little scholarly attention that Oates’s *Black Girl/White Girl* has received has downplayed the novel’s interest in race. Maureen Ryan views the novel in terms of its highly negative portrayal of the 1960s generation, seeing Oates’s primary critique as directed towards Genna’s parents who damage their children through their neglect of family values and their commitment to various forms of radicalism.<sup>8</sup> The lack of critical attention may reflect the lack of explicit interest in Oates’s depictions of race, even though race relations are a recurring theme in her writing. Or it may have to do with the somewhat negative assessments of contemporary reviewers, who agree that the novel is not one of her best. Contemporary reviews tend to praise Oates for taking on the important subject of American race relations, but to criticize her for coming up short. Writing for *The Guardian*, Stephen Amidon admires the portraits of the two main characters, but finds that the novel “never really catches fire as historical or social fiction” in spite of its “grand ambitions to speak about race and radicalism in America.”<sup>9</sup> While *Pub-*

<sup>6</sup> Kelly Hurly, “Abject and Grotesque”, *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, eds. Catherine Spooner & Emma McEvoy (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p 141.

<sup>7</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, “Writing as a Natural Reaction”, *Time*, 10/10 1969, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> Maureen Ryan, “Cracks in the System. Children in Contemporary Narratives about the 1960s in America”, *War, Literature, and the Arts* 25 (2013), pp. 7–8.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Amidon, “Sisters under the Skin”, *The Guardian* 18/11 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview28> [accessed 2019-06-01].

*lishers Weekly* considers it an “anecdotal novel” which “feels slight,”<sup>10</sup> *Kirkus Review* finds it “strident and forced.”<sup>11</sup> Mary Flanagan considers it “a nerve-wracking account of reverse racism born of white guilt”, both “bold and distressing,” but she, too, suggests the resolution is too rushed, the plot twists finally undercutting and overpowering the portraits of the protagonists.<sup>12</sup> This article will examine the problematic issue of plot twists, reverse racism, and white guilt, and how Oates’s use of Gothic tropes shapes her treatment of interracial encounters and relations.

In *Black Girl/White Girl* the enclosed university campus is a microcosm for white, liberal society of the 1970s, and it provides a perfect Gothic setting for examining the tense interplay between reason and unreason, liberal idealism and fanaticism. Like the Gothic itself, educational institutions are rooted in enlightenment ideals about reason and rationality. As Anne Williams puts it, “Enlightenment thought [is] characteristically ordered and organized by creating institutions to enforce distinctions between society and its other, whether it resides in madness, illness, criminality, or sexuality.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the school can be viewed as having the same function as prisons and mental institutions, families and the church: “to define, classify, control, and regulate” modern subjects.<sup>14</sup> The single-sex college dormitory, Haven House, where Genna and Minette room, is a modern counterpart to the convent of earlier Gothic fiction. It is also the cheapest residence hall at the college, with most of the boarders on scholarships, coming from “disadvantaged” backgrounds.<sup>15</sup> Imbuing the college campus with Gothic atmosphere, making it the site of mysterious and unspeakable persecutions, is a way to interrogate or to reflect a fear of changes in US society – specifically, I suggest, a fear of minority student access to educational advantage and other forms of white privilege.

<sup>10</sup> *Publishers Weekly*, Oct., <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-06-112564-5> [accessed 2019-06-05].

<sup>11</sup> *Kirkus Review* 15/6 2006, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/joyce-carol-oates/black-girlwhite-girl/> [accessed 2019-06-01].

<sup>12</sup> Mary Flanagan, “Black Girl, White Girl, by Joyce Carol Oates”, *The Independent* 17/11 2006, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/black-girl-white-girl-by-joyce-carol-oates-424538.html> [accessed 2019-06-05].

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Sherry R. Truffin, “‘Screaming While School was in Session’. The Construction of Monstrosity in Stephen King’s Schoolhouse Gothic”, in *The Gothic Other. Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*, eds. Ruth Beinstock Anolik & Douglas L. Howard (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), p. 237.

<sup>14</sup> Truffin 2004, p. 236.

<sup>15</sup> Oates 2007, p. 75.

The fictional Schuyler College is steeped in rational thought and humanist values, clearly marked in the narrative by progressive attitudes toward racial equality and affirmative action. For example, in her college application Genna has indicated that she prefers to room with an individual of a race or races other than her own.<sup>16</sup> Since the 1970s and 1980s, American universities have been central to discussions about the value of racial and ethnic diversity, and – due in part to the persistence of de facto residential segregation of US towns and cities – campuses and residence halls have offered many students their earliest, strongest, and most intimate experiences of such diversity. Methods for freshman roommate assignment have varied over the decades, from testing and questionnaires designed to identify compatibility to random pairing seeking various outcomes, including greater “diversity”. Today there is a consensus among researchers that living with a roommate of another race reduces prejudice,<sup>17</sup> and some studies show that campus diversity promotes interracial friendships.<sup>18</sup> Diversity in organizations is broadly correlated today with positive outcomes.<sup>19</sup> As Mary J. Fischer explains, decades of affirmative action policies in the US have raised minority college enrollment and increased campus diversity. Research on diversity and interracial relations suggests that they benefit both majority and minority students, for example in terms of academic or intellectual achievement and civic and intellectual engagement, while other studies suggest that interracial contact benefits primarily white students.<sup>20</sup> One study, for instance, proposes “the one friend rule” to capture the way in which some white individuals claim a single interracial friendship in order to “project a generalized value for diversity” and claim benefits from having such a friendship which do not accrue to the non-white friend.<sup>21</sup> Set in the 1960s and 1970s, with its frame story in 1990, but written by Oates in the 1980s and published in 2006, *Black Girl/White Girl* gives voice to concerns in higher education with shifting and sometimes

<sup>16</sup> Oates 2007, p. 96.

<sup>17</sup> Tara D. Hudson, “Random Roommates. Supporting Our Students in Developing Friendships Across Difference”, *About Campus* (2018), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Mary J. Fischer, “Does Campus Diversity Promote Friendship Diversity? A Look at Interracial Friendships in College”, *Social Science Quarterly* 89:3 (2008), pp. 631–632.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher W. Munn, “The One Friend Rule. Race and Social Capital in an Interracial Network”, *Social Problems* 65 (2018), p. 476.

<sup>20</sup> Fischer 2008, p. 632.

<sup>21</sup> Munn 2018, p. 473.

conflicting attitudes to affirmative action and the value of racial and other forms of diversity on campus.<sup>22</sup>

Haven House would appear, then, to be built upon progressive rationality and openness, eschewing discriminatory practices against non-whites and disadvantaged students. In this it is like the Elias Meade House, the founders' home which was used in the 1800s to temporarily shelter runaway slaves on their way north with the Underground Railroad. The history of slavery continues into the present, however, and both locales become sites of challenges to the narratives that define them.

In an early scene – the scene in which Genna first meets Minette and her family, neither yet aware that they have been assigned as roommates – new students and their families are taken on a guided tour of the historic Elias Meade House on Schuyler campus, once the spartan home of its Quaker founders, Genna's ancestors. The guide speaks with “an air of spontaneity, pleasure,” as she praises the “idealistic, spiritual” founders for their commitment to “the Quaker principle of the equality of all souls before God...”.<sup>23</sup> The guide goes on to recount Meade’s true passion, the abolitionist movement, and his involvement in coordinating the activities of the Underground Railroad, as well as in hiding runaway slaves in the house, risking imprisonment for his violation of the Fugitive Slave Act. The guide explains that Generva Meade had similarly been active in the women’s suffrage movement and at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in organizations such as the NAACP. Genna takes pride in the family history of civil disobedience and social reform.

The scene goes on to establish the central theme of challenges to white privilege and the white superiority that permeates many liberal views on race, and it also demonstrates Genna’s interior struggle with these challenges. As Genna narrates it, the guide is enthusiastic and proud of the college’s history: “she spoke of ‘fugitive Negroes,’ ‘runaway slaves’ – ‘men, women, children of color.’ Though she was certainly aware of the black family staring at her she seemed oblivious of their unease for this was a

<sup>22</sup> Additionally, according to reviewer Elissa Schappell, the novel was based on a true event occurring in the 1970s. *Black Girl/White Girl* might be considered an “academic novel” of the type Jeffrey J. Williams’s sociology of genres has demonstrated to be on the rise since the 1990s, and to often be of a politically conservative bent. See Elissa Schappell, “Roommates and Strangers”, *The New York Times* 15/10 2006, np, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/15/books/review/Schappell.t.html> [accessed 2019-06-01] and Jeffrey J. Williams, “The Rise of the Academic Novel”, *American Literary History* 24:3 (2012), pp. 570, 581.

<sup>23</sup> Oates 2007, pp. 36–37.

bright spirited recitation she'd given many times in the past..."<sup>24</sup> The guide is thus taken aback by Minette's father who interrupts her to insist that "it was not just white folks who saw to the 'railroad.' It was Negroes helping Negroes, too. Tell me there was anybody like Harriet Tubman amongst the whites! Or William Still! Ma'am, if you speak of the 'railroad' you need to speak of these folks, too."<sup>25</sup> Reverend Swift's insistence upon a counter history – one that ascribes agency and courage to African Americans – disrupts the guide's narrative. In characteristic fashion, Genna's highly detailed observations and her anguished thoughts are meticulously recorded:

The guide stared at him blinking in surprise. A shiny-coppery-haired middle-aged Caucasian woman in a school blazer and pleated skirt, suddenly humbled as if stripped naked.<sup>26</sup> You could see that she'd never before been challenged in Elias Meade House. The black man had addressed her with the air of one accustomed to authority, deference; the woman instinctively knew to defer to him, but her memorized words were of no hope to her. I had some knowledge of Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave from Maryland who had become a legend in her time helping hundreds of slaves to freedom at great risk to her life, but I knew nothing of William Still. I wanted to say something in support of the offended black man and his family but I seemed to know that any interference on my part would be resented by them; and I felt sorry for the white woman whose discreetly rouged cheeks were now flushed dull-red, and who smiled at her challenger like one whose coquetry has been flung back into her face.<sup>27</sup>

Genna's divided loyalties along race lines are prominent, and it is this division that to a large extent establishes Genna as a sympathetic character in her own story. She is a young, privileged white woman who wishes to live up to the progressive ideals of her ancestors and her father, a charismatic lawyer who has made his reputation by defending activists and protesters in the 1960s.

Throughout the scene Genna has a hyperawareness of the black family, not least Jewell, Minette's younger sister. As the guide offers the group access to the cramped, hidden enclosure in the attic which could accommodate as many as 12 fugitives, it is Jewell who takes the initiative to explore, and Genna who joins her: "It was a quicksilver alliance. Naughty

<sup>24</sup> Oates 2007, p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Oates 2007, p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> See also Oates's short story, "Naked," discussed below.

<sup>27</sup> Oates 2007, p. 42.

young girls defying disapproving/astonished elders".<sup>28</sup> Genna's interpretation – that the two girls are bound in the moment by age and personality which transcends race – is soon undercut. As they climb the stairs to the attic, Genna is strongly drawn to Jewell: "I thought that I could smell the pungent scent of Jewel's stiff-plaited hair. I wanted badly to touch her. I knew that her skin would be hot and oily-damp to the touch as my own was hot and dry."<sup>29</sup> Genna's attention to Jewell's physicality strikes a disturbing note in their "alliance", which finally extends only so far. When Jewell mocks the guide in the hidden enclosure, saying "I be a 'SCAPED SLAVE OF COL-LOR" and Genna says she, too, is a fugitive slave, Jewell "snort[s] with derision."<sup>30</sup> Genna had previously seen her looking at the portraits of the founders as if she would spit on them. The narrator attributes to her the thoughts: "*White folks! Ain't white folks hot shit, now?*"<sup>31</sup> Genna is finally overcome with a sensation of death in the room, and she leaves it in something of a panic. This early scene suggests Genna's tendency to exoticize blackness, undercutting her color-blind idealism and suggesting that this is inadequate as a basis of interracial friendship and understanding.

The first-person perspective, in both the frame and embedded narrative, draws attention to Genna's perceptions, thought processes, and feelings in relation to others – in short, to her subjectivity. This is in keeping with the Gothic, for as Judith Halberstam notes, "Gothic fiction is a technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known."<sup>32</sup> The frame story emphasizes Genna's feeling of moral guilt, while her sense of economic privilege and white guilt is even more prominent in the framed tale. For example, Genna actively chooses to stay in Haven House, the cheapest residence hall, where, as noted, most of the other students are on scholarships, coming from "disadvantaged" backgrounds. Genna reflects: "I was eager to believe that I had come to seem one of them. My clothes, my demeanor, my behavior did not suggest entitlement, privilege."<sup>33</sup> In the US context, class and race are broadly correlated, and Genna struggles throughout the novel with white privilege and white guilt. Frequently, however, she sees herself as

<sup>28</sup> Oates 2007, p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Oates 2007, p. 42.

<sup>30</sup> Oates 2007, p. 44.

<sup>31</sup> Oates 2007, p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows. Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Oates 2007, p. 75.

being *made* to feel guilty: “Minette had the power to make me feel guilty, no matter how unjustly”; the other students “were made to feel guilty in Minette’s sight.”<sup>34</sup> Formulations such as these suggest that Genna experiences guilt as a form of what Robin Diangelo terms “white fragility.” White fragility is a process, one which involves defensive responses to various manifestations of “racial stress” which can arise among white Americans from acts and situations as simple as calling attention to racial difference. These responses involve emotions ranging from anger to guilt, and behaviors ranging from argumentation to withdrawal. Though the feelings and behaviors signal vulnerability, white fragility is in fact “a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.”<sup>35</sup>

Genna struggles with feelings of white guilt about white privilege in an important passage concerning Minette’s poor academic achievement and her inability to understand her limitations and grow past them. Genna feels distress when she discovers (by examining the contents of Minette’s wastebasket) that Minette has been given a passing grade for a poorly written essay, as well as an opportunity to revise it for a higher grade, when Genna was not allowed to try to improve on her A-. But, she reflects, she had to realize she did not have Minette’s socioeconomic disadvantages and so “I did not deserve special attention from my professors. As Maximilian Meade would have said, I’ve been born to unearned privilege, in my white skin”<sup>36</sup>. This apparent concession to the justice of Minette’s special treatment is unsettled for readers, however, by being immediately followed by Minette’s surly complaints about how her expectations for being high school salutatorian had been dashed by a “crippled-up little guy like a monkey, in a wheelchair”, indicating that Minette is unsympathetic to potentially corresponding compensatory measures for people with disabilities.<sup>37</sup> To attain a precarious sense of sisterhood with Minette, Genna denies her own academic achievements and implies to Minette that her grades, like Minette’s, are low. In other words, Genna’s expression of humble generosity actually allows her to occupy the moral high ground and to maintain a sense of white superiority.

<sup>34</sup> Oates 2007, pp. 56, 75.

<sup>35</sup> Robin Diangelo, *White Fragility. Why it’s so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon P, 2018), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Oates 2007, p. 98.

<sup>37</sup> Oates 2007, p. 98.

Genna also vacillates between understanding the world in racial terms and denying the relevance of race. In several instances she engages in what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has identified as color-blind racism, a post-Civil Rights form of racism that is more subtle and covertly expressed than before, but that works in pernicious ways to uphold racial categories and prejudice.<sup>38</sup> For example, when Minette implies she is being targeted on racial grounds, Genna posits that harassment might be simply because “Minette had made herself generally disliked … for her fiercely outspoken and independent ways.”<sup>39</sup> In the move from group (African American) to individual (Minette Swift) race is removed from the equation of possible mistreatment. Later, Genna considers the meaning of the image of Sara Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus,” that she finds slipped under the door to the suite she shares with Minette:

I would wonder if the act hadn’t been purely personal, aimed against Minette Swift as an individual, and not ‘racist.’ Yet how swiftly and crudely the personal becomes the racial! As if, beneath ordinary hatred, there is a deeper, more virulent and deadly racial hatred to be tapped.<sup>40</sup>

This apparent admission of the effects of racial hatred, deeper than hatred for an individual, regardless of race, falters under another thought, that the drawing of Sara Baartman is “the emblem perhaps of all women, it was a pornographic image rendered in derision, disgust, loathing, *Hottentot Venus the Toast of London 1815*. Never had I seen any image so grotesque and so fascinating, close up”.<sup>41</sup> Here, misogyny occludes racism, explaining the image in a manner which denies racism and, additionally, allows Genna at least the theoretical possibility of sharing the position of deni-

<sup>38</sup> The concept of color-blind racism set forth in his Bonilla-Silva’s full-length work from 2009, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists. Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), is a development of his earlier work on “New Racism” in which he emphasizes that racism is a structural formation, rather than (only) an attitude, and identifies five key elements, including the “covert nature of racial discourse and racial practices, “ as well as “the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever growing claim by whites that they experience ‘reverse racism’” and “the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality.” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “The New Racism. Racial Structure in the United States, 1960s–1990s”, *Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in the United States. Toward the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Paul Wong (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 56.

<sup>39</sup> Oates 2007, p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Oates 2007, p. 128.

<sup>41</sup> Oates 2007, p. 134.

grated woman with Minette. As in the previous example, however, a sisterhood forged on the denial of the significance of race is hardly realistic. Nevertheless, Genna's struggle to understand race relations as they play out between her and her roommate plays to the sympathies of a white readership, who may be encouraged to look critically but not *too* critically at thought processes such as these.

Genna's thoughts are given a Gothic twist by disturbing, elliptical references to half-remembered events at the family house at Chadds Ford during Genna's childhood. In the first half of the novel, however, the primary locus of events in the retrospective tale is the dormitory. In true Gothic fashion, mysterious events play out in Haven Hall, all of them surrounding Genna's roommate. The embedded tale opens with Minette's discovery of a cracked window over her desk. This discovery produces a strong reaction in Minette, of something close to terror, which is incomprehensible to Genna, who attributes the cracked window to the violent storm of the night before. The Gothic trope of irrational vs. rational explanations for events is thus quickly established.

The opening scene of the retrospective tale also establishes Minette as a grotesque figure. While it is difficult to define the grotesque in absolute terms, Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund draw attention to the incongruity at its heart, which is frequently expressed in terms of unresolved oppositions: "... grotesquerie revolves around the categories of inclusion (the norm) and exclusion (the abnormal) in order to preserve marked distinctions between 'us' and 'them', 'self and other'"<sup>42</sup>. Genna's narrative records her struggle to bridge such distinctions, at the same time as she minutely registers distinctions between herself and the majority of students, on the one hand, and Minette, on the other.<sup>43</sup>

Because readers know from the frame tale that Minette is long dead, her living presence in the retrospective story is immediately somewhat macabre. In other words, a Gothic effect is an immediate possibility of the narrative structure, and this is realized as the retrospective narrative opens with Minette's voice, a plaintive "Ohhh God," followed by the narrator's observa-

<sup>42</sup> Justin D. Edwards & Rune Graulund, *Grotesque. The New Critical Idiom* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Minette is contrasted with other young black students, particularly Crystal Odom, who is light-skinned, successful academically, artistically, socially, and athletically. "Often [Crystal] was the only 'minority person' in a group and played her role with zest. She had little patience for clichéd racial pieties. White-girl discomfort made her laugh as if she were being tickled" (67). She mimics and mocks Minette.

tions that Minette habitually talks to herself, scolds herself, and prays loudly. Genna describes Minette thus:

My roommate was standing with her back to me, oblivious of me. She was standing very still, as if paralyzed. Her head was tilted back at an awkward angle and she was staring at the window above her desk, where a crack had appeared in the upper half of the pane. Minette turned vaguely toward me, without seeming to have heard me. Her eyes were widened in wordless panic behind her childish pink plastic glasses and her lips moved soundlessly.<sup>44</sup>

Minette appears here as an hysteric, and her physical appearance fascinates Genna, who describes her face, skin, and body in great detail, her “wedge-shaped” hair, “stiff and jutting like wires, smelling of natural oils”, her “waist, fleshy, thick”, and her “wide hips and sloping breasts”, curiously at odds with her child-like innocence.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Minette’s dark body changes as the narrative progresses; she eats almost uncontrollably and grows fatter and fatter, her compulsive eating and hiding of her food stores leading to infestations of insects in the college suite. Her female body becomes indeed grotesque, Rabelaisian, exceeding its own boundaries, and it incongruously and transgressively combines innocence with precociousness, naiveté with cynicism, in a way that implicitly calls for regulation and control, symbolized by her increasingly strained belt. The characterization of Minette’s body coincides with Mary Russo’s idea of the grotesque body as “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official ‘low’ culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation”.<sup>46</sup> In Bakhtinian fashion, the emphasis on Minette’s unruly body and its disruption of the regime of the educational context further aligns her character with the social transformation of the university as it opens its doors to racial minorities and students with low socio-economic backgrounds.

The female grotesque, Russo also argues, is in many ways “a tautology, since the female is always defined against the male norm”.<sup>47</sup> Looking specifically at monsters, Judith Halberstam suggests that “European anti-Semitism and American racism towards black Americans are precisely Gothic discourses given over to the making monstrous of particular kinds of

<sup>44</sup> Oates 2007, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Oates 2007, pp.10–11.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque. Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Russo 1994, p. 12.

bodies.”<sup>48</sup> In the portrayal of Minette, gender, race, and class intersect to establish her difference and grotesque body. For example, because Minette is on a merit scholarship and her parents have less money than many of the others at the college, she cannot buy new clothes as she gains weight, and Genna observes the “raw-looking notches made with a scissors” in Minette’s black leather belt, and her one good skirt, outgrown, fastened with a safety pin under a loose pullover.<sup>49</sup> These signs of her low economic status add to her grotesque image.

Oates might thus be viewed as using the grotesque to make visible affective responses to relative poverty. Oates is certainly interested in class issues in the US; she has in fact insisted that the “great American adventure has always been one of social ascension”.<sup>50</sup> Oates has also treated class in higher education in fiction throughout her career, as the epigraph to this article, taken from another Gothic-inspired university novel, also indicates.<sup>51</sup> Complicating this reading, however, is the fact that Minette is so clearly dehumanized in the novel. In the opening scene, her vocalizations are “half-grunts/half-moans”,<sup>52</sup> and her speech is generally rendered as mannered (“Scuseme?”), aggressive, frequently incomprehensible: “Minette was a medley of irksome sounds: mutterings, mumbles, exaggerated sighs, humming, singing, and of course praying, grinding-teeth, occasional weeping.”<sup>53</sup> Her poor academic skills, religious fervor, and seemingly low intelligence is another way that the narrative emphasizes Minette’s body, rather than her mind. By the end of the framed, retrospective tale, when Genna visits Minette in a private room at Stone Cottage, to which she has been moved because of alleged racial harassment at Haven Hall, Minette has become sick, her body leaking oils and smelling of sweat, her room filthy, littered with “soiled” clothing, the wastebasket “brimming” with used sanitary napkins smelling of dried blood.<sup>54</sup> Though Genna smells codeine in the

<sup>48</sup> Halberstam 1995, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Oates 2007, p. 75.

<sup>50</sup> Gavin Cologne-Brookes, *Dark Eyes on America. The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), p. 30.

<sup>51</sup> See Hermann Severin, *The Image of the Intellectual in the Short Stories of Joyce Carol Oates* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1986) on Oates’s early fiction with academic settings and themes. She continues throughout her career: *Mudwoman* from 2012 is another university novel which uses the grotesque and features a false accusation of discrimination.

<sup>52</sup> Oates 2007, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Oates 2007, p. 79.

<sup>54</sup> Oates 2007, pp. 232–33.

room, she lights the many candles Minette has set out in the shape of a cross. On the eve of dropping out of college, Minette becomes a completely abject figure, finally dying in hideous fashion in the fire that Genna has helped to ignite.

Though Genna refers to her roommate as a kind of twin because they are born just two days apart, this designation produces the same reaction in Minette as Genna's joke about being an escaped slave had produced in Jewell: derision. Genna's effort to understand and identify with her roommate repeatedly fails. In an interview discussing *Black Girl/White Girl* Oates comments on the inability of many white Americans to understand African Americans:

They don't grasp the fact that for a black person existentially, ontologically, it's a different experience. Minette really isn't defining herself in terms of white people. She's not defining herself in terms almost of anything except for her strong Christianity and her family. And I think it's very confounding to many white people when black people say, I don't really care about you. I don't really care if you like me.<sup>55</sup>

Minette is impervious to Genna and, arguably, she remains “an enigma to [Genna]. A riddle, and a dazzlement” throughout the text.<sup>56</sup> The text underscores the failure of liberal white subjectivity to transcend its position of white privilege.

An important question *Black Girl/White Girl* poses is whether Minette also remains a riddle to her readers. Oates uses a first-person narrator to render and explore white, liberal consciousness about matters of race and class, themes she has explored repeatedly in her writing. In the early short story, “Naked”, for example, Oates uses the third-person to focalize the consciousness of a white, middle-class woman of liberal politics who is violently and inexplicably attacked by a “pack” of black children, who strip her naked and

<sup>55</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, “Ten Questions for Joyce Carol Oates”, Interview with Andrea Sachs, *Time* 1/11 2006, np, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1553266,00.html> [accessed 2019-09-10].

<sup>56</sup> Oates 2007, p. 11. This characterization resonates in interesting ways with Herman Melville’s portrait of Babo in *Benito Cereno*. Babo, the leader of a mutiny on a slave ship, poses as a servile slave to dupe the captain of another ship. Babo’s duplicity is emphasized in the plot, but also Captain Delano’s willful blindness. Babo, captured and judged, is burned alive, but his head, “that hive of subtlety”, placed on a post, continues to gaze “unabashedly” at his interlocutors. See Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno”, in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, ed. Harold Beaver (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 307.

beat her. The descriptions of these children as “swarm[ing]” over her, “savage and deft as a predatory animal”, invoking in her a fear they will cannibalize her, for they are “like ravenous animals” reveals the shakiness of the protagonist’s idealism, which would prefer to see children instead of black children – even though the story makes clear that the race of these children is something she immediately registers.<sup>57</sup> The dehumanizing language is clearly marked as the unnamed protagonist’s, however, and so it is distinct from the authorial voice, which instead calls attention to the failure of white liberal understandings of African American realities. Moreover, remaining within this limited perspective and not attempting to “speak for” African Americans can be interpreted as a form of respect for difference. (Such a viewpoint is expressed in *Black Girl/White Girl* in one of the fictional quotations from Max Meade’s writings: “The wish to know another person fully is a way of appropriation, exploitation. It is a way of shame that must be repudiated”.<sup>58</sup>) Something similar appears to operate in *Black Girl/White Girl*. Minette rebuffs or remains insensible to most of Genna’s attempts to befriend her, and she is characterized as indifferent to others as well. But the narrative perspective does not provide an easily maintained separation between Genna’s limited perspective and the author’s, resulting in a reinscription of racial difference and racist stereotypes. Indeed, as the narrative progresses there is a growing sense that just as Genna needs Minette to validate her and her family’s progressive identity, so Oates appears to need Minette’s mute blackness for the same reason.

Just as Oates’s racialized use of the grotesque becomes problematic, so does her plot structure and her use of the Gothic motif of mysterious events. Mysterious events continue to occur around Minette, including those that explicitly target her because she is black. Her *Norton Anthology of American Literature* is lost or taken, and then found damaged in the alley outside their dorm (56), leading to suspicions among the young women and their questioning by the resident advisor. Soon after, Genna finds the Baartman picture slipped under their door. She does not initially report the incident, hoping to “shield” Minette from the racist image. Shortly afterward Minette loses a glove her mother had knitted for her, and later a racist message urging Minette to “go home” is placed in Minette’s mailbox.<sup>59</sup> A racist slur is written on the outside of the door to Genna and Minette’s room, and

<sup>57</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, “Naked”, *Heat and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 124–125.

<sup>58</sup> Oates 2007, p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> Oates 2007, pp. 126, 181.

Minette also claims to have been pushed so that she sprained her ankle badly. The drawing, the cut-out message, and the racial slur on the door are reproduced graphically in the text – the only instances of such a departure from customary typography.

The apparent escalation of harassment provides Genna with opportunities to demonstrate her solidarity with her roommate by not siding with others who accuse Minette of lying about events. Genna repairs the *Norton*, destroys the drawing, cleans and mends a glove she finds, and above all, she defends Minette, increasingly against her better judgement. However, when she recognizes the distinctive cut-out letters of the abusive missive to Minette as being the same font found in Minette's religious tracts – which co-incidentally disappear from their previously prominent display in Minette's room – Genna realizes that Minette has indeed fabricated her own racial persecution.

This discovery is a turning point in the novel. The emphasis on Genna's consciousness and subjectivity remains, but the suggestion that Minette has fabricated her harassment creates an entirely different reading dynamic. Readers are invited to be critical of Minette's actions and to view charges of racially motivated hate crimes as ploys to conceal inferior scholastic ability among minorities. Readers are also invited to remain sympathetic to Genna as a victim of "reverse racism," but to question her lying to protect Minette. In other words, the critical gaze is directed away from Genna's internal struggle with racism and interracial relations. Her early traumatization, indeed, becomes more explicit from this point on, and Oates plots this so that Genna's childhood memories vie with the more immediate retrospective narration involving the college and Minette.

In the later part of the novel, Genna's defense of Minette runs parallel to her highly conflicted defense of her father, whom she admires for his charismatic legal defense of Vietnam war protesters and civil rights cases, but also resents because of what his past actions put her through during her childhood at Chadds Ford in the 1960s, at a house where hippies, leftists, and radicals come and go, where her mother floats in and out of a drugged existence, and where her father, the high-profile lawyer, makes sporadic appearances. When Genna asks her father if their house was a safe house, she provokes a violent reaction in Max Meade: "A look in Daddy's face wanting to grab, shake, shout".<sup>60</sup> Though he reassures Genna, then about 10, that

<sup>60</sup> Oates 2007, p. 60.

their house is safe, he becomes furious with his wife, Veronica, demanding to know what she and her “junkie boyfriend” have been talking about so openly.<sup>61</sup> The chapter concludes with Genna’s words:

*Safe house.* Saying the words to myself in secret. For *safe house* made me feel warm. *Safe house* was something small you could hide in, I thought. Like a dollhouse where if you were small enough to fit inside you would be so small nobody would come looking for you.<sup>62</sup>

The irony of this statement increases as the narrative progresses, and readers become aware of the truly *unsafe* home life Genna has had, in large part because of Max’s radical politics. It becomes increasingly clear that, as a child, she was sexually assaulted, witnessed numerous sexual acts among the casual visitors to the house, witnessed at the age of 11 a young man attempt to eviscerate himself with a paring knife at her home, and was for a time literally abandoned by both of her parents.<sup>63</sup> The horrors at the house at Chadds Ford displace the historical horrors of slavery and the alleged hate-crimes associated with the other two houses in the text.

Genna clings to the belief that her father never broke the law, just as she maintains that Minette is the victim, rather than the author of abuse. However, with the understanding that Minette fabricated the hate crimes against her, Genna also understands that her father has harbored violent political activists turned terrorist. The young man who attempts harakiri, Ansel Trimmer, survives and, it will transpire, lives long enough to engage in terrorist activities, including a bombing that kills an African-American watchman at a Dow chemical plant. The text is ambiguous about whether or not Trimmer commits suicide five years after the watchman’s death, but it is clear than he and others have testified to Max’s involvement in terrorist activities, claiming that Max was providing a safe house for anti-war protesters suspected of bombings, as well as supplying funds for arms, ammunition, and explosives, and securing counterfeit identity papers for ter-

<sup>61</sup> Oates 2007, p. 61.

<sup>62</sup> Oates 2007, p. 61.

<sup>63</sup> Oates 2007, pp. 197, 120. The novel conforms in part to Ellen Moers’s notion of the “Female Gothic,” in which the heroine is typically motherless and unprotected, facing a threat of containment or violation. Genna’s mother is unengaged with her children, more interested in drugs and lovers, while her father is frequently absent, in both the frame and embedded tale. At one point, both parents abandon their two children completely, leaving them to fend for themselves. This causes Genna’s brother to break entirely with his parents.

rorists. As events at Haven Hall escalate, Genna withstands the urge to testify against Minette and instead finally does testify, under secrecy, to her father's guilt, in effect sealing his fate of life-long imprisonment.

The grotesquerie that has attached to Minette gradually also attaches itself to Max Meade. However, it is Max's head, rather than his body, that is accentuated in the text: "Hairyless gleaming head.... It was a Roman bust of a head. It was a head to be toppled, broken".<sup>64</sup> Like a modern Kurtz (also with a "lofty frontal bone" that is "impressively bald"), Max expresses his radical ideas with great eloquence.<sup>65</sup> As the narrative unfolds readers learn that Genna's understandings of white privilege and white supremacy come from her father, who appears to endorse a radical politics of difference. Genna notes, for instance, that "Maximilian Meade had written in the 1960s that 'skin-consciousness' determines vision. Virtually all Caucasians are born blind, even those who are victims of capitalism, we must be educated to see".<sup>66</sup> Readers learn in the epilogue that Max's own education takes place in prison, where he is badly beaten by other inmates and loses one eye, becoming half-blind. Increasingly grotesque in appearance, Max and his radical views on race relations also become discredited as the novel progresses, complicating Oates's critique of white privilege that dominates the first part of the novel.

The frame tale, it was noted, opens with the narrator's confession of her guilt in Minette Swift's death. The untitled text Genna writes 15 years after the fact is conceived as an "inquiry" and an "exploration" "in the service of justice": "All this time, I have been alive. I have been living, I have even acquired a professional reputation in my field, and Minette Swift has been dead".<sup>67</sup> Genna feels guilty of having obscured facts to protect her name, to protect Minette's and her family, to protect Schuyler college, and "to protect the white faces surrounding Minette".<sup>68</sup> Thus, even her specific sense of guilt about not being straightforward about matters pertaining to Minette's death – including her own role in lighting the candles – is tinged with a race consciousness that extends into the epilogue as well, where Genna has

<sup>64</sup> Oates 2007, p. 246.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer* (New York: Bantam, 1978), p. 81.

<sup>66</sup> Oates 2007, p. 87.

<sup>67</sup> Oates 2007, pp. 1–2.

<sup>68</sup> Oates 2007, p. 1.

retained a fascination for black women and where, we learn, she claims Minette Swift as a “sister” who has died.<sup>69</sup>

Just as in the embedded retrospective narrative from the 1970s, the frame tale from 1990 also transfers its attention from Minette to Max, so that it is Genna’s relationship with Max that dominates the epilogue. Indeed, Genna the historian has become aware of the intrusion of a “shadow-text” about Max Meade and “the daughter who betrayed him”.<sup>70</sup> Readers learn that the adult Genna has become intent upon leading a “purely ethical life”, but also that she considers giving the manuscript she has written to Max, so that he will finally know that it was she who informed on him. Genna’s confessional writing thus threatens to become a way of exacting revenge on her father.<sup>71</sup> The shadow-text, one might say, takes over, displacing Oates’s probing questions about white privilege and interracial friendships in the post-Civil Rights decades of affirmative action and diversity on university campuses.

In her analysis of white fragility, Diangelo argues that, in fact, white progressives cause the most day-to-day damage to people of color through their certainty that they are not racist, or are less racist, than all or most. This attitude, she claims, constitutes an implicit denial of the need to fight racism within: “White progressives do indeed uphold and perpetrate racism, but our defensiveness and certitude make it virtually impossible to explain to us how we do so”.<sup>72</sup> Oates’s novel turns a critical gaze on white, middle-class consciousness, initially using Gothic tropes and grotesque figures to examine an internal struggle with racism and to expose the workings of white privilege and white guilt. Finally, however, her use of the grotesque reinforces stereotypical images of black women as bound to the body, rather than the mind, and the Gothic plot explains racist and misogynous hate crimes as a form of guilt-inducing manipulation. In such ways, readers are invited to partake of a sense of white fragility, particularly in relation to the modern university which, Jeffrey J. Williams observes, is no longer an elite experience but a part of mass culture<sup>73</sup>. It is up to readers of *Black Girl/White Girl* to determine whether there is indeed another turn of the screw: whether Oates asks us to view the white guilt and the white

<sup>69</sup> Oates 2007, p. 271.

<sup>70</sup> Oates 2007, p. 263.

<sup>71</sup> Oates 2007, p. 265.

<sup>72</sup> Diangelo 2018, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Williams 2012, p. 577.

fragility Genna displays in the frame tale as grotesque, deformed by its anxiety about race relations in the US. As Edwards and Graulund remind us, "... grotesque figures and images lie in sharp contrast to the economic and social mythologies of an 'American dream'", including the dream of sisterhood and diversity in higher education.<sup>74</sup>

### Reference List

- Amidon, Stephen, "Sisters under the Skin", *The Guardian* 18/11 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview28> [accessed 2019-06-01].
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, "The New Racism. Racial Structure in the United States, 1960s-1990s", in *Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in the United States. Toward the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Paul Wong (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 55–101.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *Racism without Racists. Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).
- Cologne-Brookes, Gavin, *Dark Eyes on America. The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).
- Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer* (New York: Bantam, 1978).
- Daly, Brenda, *Lavish Self-Divisions. The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996).
- Diangelo, Robin, *White Fragility. Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon P, 2018).
- Edwards, Justin D. & Graulund, Rune, *Grotesque. The New Critical Idiom* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013).
- Fischer, Mary J., "Does Campus Diversity Promote Friendship Diversity? A Look at Interracial Friendships in College", *Social Science Quarterly* 89:3 (2008), pp. 631–655.
- Flanagan, Mary, "Black Girl, White Girl, by Joyce Carol Oates", *The Independent* 17/11 2006, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/black-girl-white-girl-by-joyce-carol-oates-424538.html> [accessed 2019-06-05].
- Goddu, Teresa A., "American Gothic", *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, eds. Catherine Spooner & Emma McEvoy (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 63–72.
- Halberstam, Judith, *Skin Shows. Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995).
- Hudson, Tara D., "Random Roommates. Supporting Our Students in Developing Friendships Across Difference", *About Campus*. (2018), pp. 13–22.
- Hurly, Kelly, "Abject and Grotesque", *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, eds. Catherine Spooner & Emma McEvoy, (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 137–46.
- Kirkus Review* 15/6 2006, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/joyce-carol-oates/black-girlwhite-girl/> [accessed 2019-06-01].
- Melville, Herman, "Benito Cereno", *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, ed. Harold Beaver. (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 215–307.
- Moers, Ellen, *Literary Women: The Great Writers*, (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

<sup>74</sup> Edwards & Graulund 2013, p. 12.

- Munn, Christopher W., "The One Friend Rule. Race and Social Capital in an Interracial Network", *Social Problems* 65 (2018), pp. 473–90.
- Oates, Joyce Carol, "Writing as a Natural Reaction," *Time*, 10 Oct. 1969.
- Oates, Joyce Carol, "Naked", *Heat and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 123–38.
- Oates, Joyce Carol, "Ten Questions for Joyce Carol Oates", Interview with Andrea Sachs, *Time* 1/11 2006, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1553266,00.html> [accessed 2019-09-10].
- Oates, Joyce Carol, *Black Girl/White Girl* (London: Harper, 2007).
- Publishers Weekly*, Oct., <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-06-112564-5> [accessed 2019-06-05].
- Russo, Mary, *The Female Grotesque. Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- Ryan, Maureen, "Cracks in the System: Children in Contemporary Narratives about the 1960s in America," *War, Literature, and the Arts* 25 (2013), pp. 1–16.
- Schappell, Elissa, "Roommates and Strangers", *The New York Times* 15/10 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/15/books/review/Schappell.t.html> [accessed 2019-06-01].
- Severin, Hermann, *The Image of the Intellectual in the Short Stories of Joyce Carol Oates* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1986).
- Showalter, Elaine, *Faculty Towers. The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 2005).
- Truffin, Sherry R., "'Screaming While School was in Session'. The Construction of Monstrosity in Stephen King's Schoolhouse Gothic", *The Gothic Other. Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*, eds. Ruth Beinstock Anolik & Douglas L. Howard (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), pp. 236–48.
- Williams, Jeffrey J., "The Rise of the Academic Novel", *American Literary History* 24:3 (2012), pp. 561–89.